Summary of Global Climate Coalition Activities: 1996-1997 March 1998

To date, the political agenda of the Global Climate Coalition (GCC) has been to stall action on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The GCC is a coalition of business trade associations and private companies and its board members include: American Forest & Paper, Chevron, Exxon, Ford, General Motors, Mobil, National Mining Association and Texaco. The general membership includes Amoco, BP, Dow, Goodyear, Shell, and Union Carbide. During the last two years, the GCC has tried to undermine the broad scientific consensus that climate change is a legitimate threat, has spent large sums of money on public relations that has confused the public while directly lobbying governments to ignore the threat of climate disruption.

Fall 1997: Advertising Campaign and Lobbying

In August 1997, the newly appointed Executive Director of the GCC, Gail McDonald, formed zeros with her fingers when asked what the GCC would like to see happen in Kyoto. *(New York Times 8/5/97)* Shortly thereafter, the GCC launched a $13 million advertising campaign in the US against any agreement aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions internationally. This was run through an organization called the Global Climate Information Project, which was sponsored by both the GCC and the American Association of Automobile Manufacturers, among others. The advertisements falsely claimed "It's Not Global and It Won't Work." They also claimed that "Americans will pay the price. . . 50 cents more for every gallon of gasoline." Ironically, there was no treaty at that point, and no government proposals, then or now, have suggested a "50 cent" gallon gas tax.

1996-1997: Science Distortion

Before August 1997, the GCC largely focused on creating confusion in the general public about the state of science. Despite the fact that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has provided more information about climate change than has ever been known about any previous global threat, the GCC has been unrelenting in its attacks on the IPCC process and the scientists themselves. The IPCC is comprised of about 2,500 scientists from all over the world and provides the most authoritative and rigorous assessments, based only on peer-reviewed literature of the science of climate change. The GCC's premise was that until there was "certainty," we should do nothing. For example, William O'Keefe, former Vice President of the American Petroleum Institute and Chairman of the GCC, stated on June 28, 1996 that "we could wait 20 to 25 years to take action until scientific uncertainty is lessened."

Scientific Certainty

Since "scientific certainty" is central to the GCC's strategy of stalling action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, it is important to address it in this discussion. If the world waits until it has perfect confidence, it will be too late to prevent the consequences of global climate change. So, it is not a question of certainty but rather, an analysis of the probability of severe consequences from human induced climate change. Similar probability analyses have guided the public health responses to other threats that invariably involve uncertainty like the threats from tobacco, asbestos, lead and air pollution. With climate change, an overwhelming majority of scientists have concluded that there is a very high probability that climate change is already underway due to the burning of fossil fuels and there are several important certainties:

1. The surface of the earth is warming. 1997 was the hottest year on record. Nine of the eleven hottest years on record were in the last decade.
2. The concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are increasing. These concentrations are currently at approximately 380 parts per million by volume (ppmv). Pre-industrial levels were

approximately 260 ppmv.
3. Greenhouse gases trap heat in the atmosphere.

The GCC claims that "science must serve as the foundation for overall global climate policy decisions and enhanced scientific research must be the first priority. A bedrock principle addressing global climate change issues is that science - not emotional or political reactions – must serve as the foundation for global climate policy decisions." In direct contradiction to these lofty goals, the GCC and individual members have provided public platforms for the handful of scientists who are skeptical of the consensus that there is a human influence on the global climate. These scientists generally do not participate in the accepted process of publishing research in refereed journals in order to test hypotheses and conclusions. The also generally do not have expertise in the topic. However, the GCC has gone even further than just providing public relations services for these skeptic scientists. They've also attacked credible and preeminent expert scientists. Perhaps the most disturbing example of this is what happened to Dr. Benjamin Santer of Lawrence Berkeley National Lab.

Case Study: Dr. Ben Santer

In June 1996, the American Petroleum Institute, George C. Marshall Institute, and the GCC launched a vicious attack on the lead author of Chapter 8 of the IPCC's 1995 Second Assessment Report. Their strategy was to discredit the person responsible for the chapter in the IPCC report that links the threat of global climatic disruption to the burning of fossil fuels. By discrediting the author, these organizations could argue that global warming was "natural" and thereby stall the policy process to reduce emissions.

In an op-ed that appeared in the Wall Street Journal on June 19, 1996, Dr. Frederick Seitz, who was not present at any of the meetings he referred to in this op-ed, stated that the authors of the relevant chapter "deliberately deceived policymakers and the public by deleting passages that expressed uncertainty about the human impact on climate change after reviewing scientists approved the text." Dr. Seitz's charges that, "I have never witnessed a more disturbing corruption of the peer-review process than the events that led to this IPCC report," were then picked up as a news story (rather than opinion) in The New York Times. The GCC subsequently sent a letter to various members of Congress and individuals in the Clinton Administration, making precisely the same unwarranted and personal attacks. Dr. Santer maintains he was never even approached by either the GCC or Dr. Seitz for an explanation.

Dr. Seitz, who did not contribute to the IPCC, failed to mention that changes in the report were not only proper but required under the panel's peer review procedure. Dr. Santer said these charges "demonstrate his [Dr. Seitz's] ignorance of the topic and the IPCC process," and added, "The irony of this situation is that I fought hard to keep the extended discussion of uncertainties. Now I am being accused by Dr. Seitz and others of suppressing them."

GCC's attacks provoked strong statements from the normally reticent IPCC scientists. Forty of them signed a letter printed in the Wall Street Journal on June 12, 1996. Bert Bolin, IPCC Chairman; Luiz Gylvan Meira-Filho, and John Houghton, Working Group One Co-Chairmen, also wrote a letter stating that they were "completely satisfied" with the changes made to the Working Group Report.

Governments also rallied around Dr. Santer. In testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives, Rafe Pomerance of the State Department declared that the industry claims were "absurd." The Environment Minister of the United Kingdom, John Gummer, criticized the skeptics in The Financial Times saying that they, "refused to believe the evidence before them." The Canadian Council of Environment Ministers fully endorsed the key findings of the IPCC and the EU Council stated that it, "recognizes that the IPCC Second Assessment Report represents the most comprehensive and authoritative assessment in the science of climate change."

The attacks on Dr. Santer stunned the scientific community. Scientists are accustomed to working through the scientific peer-review process to resolve differences and advance understanding. Seeing a colleague's reputation smeared in the national media and before congressional committees was, not surprisingly, abhorrent to them. Dr. Santer had to spend countless hours responding to the attacks on his integrity which pulled him away from his research for many months.

In an open letter dated June 19, 1997, Dr. Santer writes:

"I am a scientist studying the nature and causes of climate change. I am not an advocate for policy solutions other problem of human-caused climate change. . . It is my considered professional opinion that the scientific evidence that has emerged subsequent to the publication of the IPCC report in June 1996 reinforces and fully warrants (his emphasis throughout) that the IPCC's 'discernible human influence' conclusion. . . Although we will never have complete certainty about the exact size of the past, present and future human effect on climate, we do know beyond any reasonable doubt that the burning of fossil fuels has modified the chemical composition of the atmosphere. The question is not whether, but rather to what extent such changes in atmospheric composition have already influence the climate of the past century and will continue to influence the climate of the 21st century. The best scientific information we have suggests that the human component of climate change is not trivially small, and that human activities are already producing a climate change "signal" that can be discriminated from the background "noise" of natural climate variability. Further modifications to the chemical composition of the Earth's atmosphere could result in very real and critical impacts on global-scale climate. It would seem prudent to confront this possibility now instead of waiting for climate changes that are large enough to give a truly unambiguous answer to the question of the "discernibility" of a human influence."

The GCC's attacks helped prompt two unprecedented statements from the scientific community in 1997. The first was the Scientists' Statement on Global Climatic Disruption. This statement was signed by approximately 3,000 scientists, and called for early domestic action to reduce U.S. emissions. This statement was signed by several Nobel laureates and 35 members of the National Academy of Scientists. Then, in October of 1997, 102 Nobel laureates and 60 US National Medal of Science winners released the World Scientists' Call for Action. This statement urged "all government leaders to demonstrate a new commitment to protecting the global environment for future generations. The important first step is to join in completing a strong and meaningful Climate Treaty at Kyoto."

The GCC press release responding to the first statement:

"A recent statement. . . raises some serious questions about their [the scientists'] understanding of the current science on climate. While some may want to believe worst case scenario predictions made by imperfect computer models, it does little to advance the public debate in a meaningful way. Members of the Global Climate Coalition believe the peer-reviewed science speaks for itself."

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